

## Quiet Enough

I have been out and about, on a tour of fairs. I have loved August for the time shared with my children at the County fair. With the girls attending school down in the Cities, my mother and I have added the Minnesota State Fair to our tour. We have seen the most amazing things down there. And do you know, we weren't the only ones?

On Saturday, there were more than 170,000 people at the Fair. That's right. Almost double the population of Duluth was smashed into an area that's really just a few city blocks in size. My understanding is that the attendance at the Fair this past weekend was down about 20%, on account of the extreme heat we have been experiencing. The thermometer said something like 97 degrees, and let me tell you, amidst all that concrete and in a crowd so tight it's hard to walk, that's plenty hot. So hot that Princess Kay of the Milky Way, the Dairy Princess, found she could discard the warm wraps she normally wears as she poses in the refrigerated booth while they carve her likeness into a 90 pound block of butter, on account of she got so overheated while waving from that parade float.

Drawn to the livestock events, we saw dozens of dairy heifers being slowly led about by young 4-H kids dressed all in white. From our vantage point high up in the Coliseum, you could almost imagine it as sort of a bovine ballet. In the Swine barn, the kids do a different sort of dance, using what look like riding crops to drive their pigs in front of the judge. Another fun event, the working dog trials involve border collies flying low to the ground almost as black, speeding bullets as they move the sheep in and out of obstacles.

But perhaps the highlight of the big Fair was the draft horse teams pulling beautifully painted wagons. They come in teams of 4, 6, and finally 8, stepping high as they thunder into the ring. Manes braided, hooves polished, harnesses gleaming under the lights, the ring fills with team after team until no more could possibly fit. Even the Budweiser Clydesdale team was there, each animal weighing in at about 2000 pounds. The driver has a mitt full of reins, and he can swing that team on command, each pair of horses having a different function in the turn. When all the teams are moving, it creates a breeze inside the arena. For my mother, it harkens back to her grandfather, who as a young teamster hauled freight for a living.

Incredible things happen at the Fair, and so I brave the heat, and the crowds, and the traffic to go and see it. But I have to admit it is with some relief that I make my way back north, leaving behind the press and the pace. Eight lanes of vehicles moving 65 mph with scarcely a breath between to correct for another driver's mistakes is a situation that builds tension for me. It's a relief to return back home to the Chippewa National Forest.

At home, an early morning on the screen porch brings a little cool relief to the searing heat as the summer winds down. The forest birds are mostly quiet now, 'though the hummingbirds still fight over the feeder as they bulk up for their long journey south. A tired sounding tree frog chirps from the garden, and you can track the whereabouts of the neighborhood crows by their calls. Occasionally a car on the county road can be heard over the crowing of my big rooster.

I live in a place that is just quiet enough. Quiet enough to feel the pulse of life around you. Quiet enough that you notice the flight of the nighthawks. August is when they head south to their wintering grounds in South America, one of the earliest of migrants. They have one of the longest migratory routes of any North American bird, and need to get an early start. They're going now, and if you look to the sky you may see them.

An insect eater, the common nighthawk is active at dawn and dusk. These birds have small bills and huge mouths framed with stiff whiskers, which helps them to catch prey while flying about. You may hear them before you see them; their call is a nasal "peent". Look up, and you will notice a robin-sized bird with long, pointed wings shaped sort of like boomerangs that flies erratically, in a fashion reminiscent of a bat.

Camouflage coloration is an apt description for this bird's plumage, which is mottled with grey, brown, black and white. It comes in handy when the bird roosts, and when it nests. Nighthawks perch lengthwise on tree branches, making them difficult to discern from the bark. They nest on bare ground or rocks, blending into the substrate.

The nest of the nighthawk is a simple scrape on the ground, with no nesting materials to speak of. The two eggs, like the birds' plumage, are mottled with grey. Mama nighthawk incubates the eggs, orienting her body along the axis of the sun's rays. She leaves the eggs in the evenings to forage. During the days, she is as much cooling the eggs, shielding them from the sun, as she is warming them at night. These ground-nesting birds are susceptible to a variety of ground predators. Their defenses include the mother's injured-bird display to distract would-be predators, and the father's diving, wing-beating, and hissing behaviors. In cities, nighthawks often nest on flat, graveled roofs.

Nighthawk populations are declining. There are likely several factors contributing to the decline, including a loss of breeding habitat, and pesticide use.

Minnesota forests have relatively low densities of breeding nighthawks. On the Chippewa National Forest you may hear occasional birds on summer evenings when they are foraging. In addition to the nasal peenting call, male nighthawks perform a courtship display that involves sharp diving towards the ground and a sudden turn upwards, producing a "booming" sound with the wings.

In our area, it is in August and September when nighthawks become obvious as they migrate. Nighthawks occur in much of Canada, as well as most of the U.S., so we are seeing the southward movement of northern birds. They move in flocks, and you may see smaller groups of birds or even flocks of thousands. Along the North Shore and Duluth people have counted as many as a thousand nighthawks per hour during peak August migration days. I read one account of 17,000 birds over a three day period. Sometimes, the birds are observed flying quite low to the ground. It's likely they are feeding while migrating.

Incredible things might be happening at the State Fair, but I have to say I am thankful there are still places that are quiet enough we can drive in an unhurried fashion, walk without a crowd, sit

peacefully for a bit of reflection, and look to the sky for signs of summer's end. The most amazing things are happening there, too.



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Photo by Libby Cable